

“Padahal kan kamu beda agama sama saya. Kenapa kamu kok ngefans sama saya itu?” How Gus Iqdam Uses Positive Politeness to Build Solidarity in the Multicultural Congregation of Sabilu Taubah

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Abstract—This study examined how Gus Iqdam (GI), a young religious leader in East Java, Indonesia, employs positive politeness strategies to foster solidarity within the multicultural Sabilu Taubah congregation, whose members come from diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Using a qualitative socio-pragmatic approach informed by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, data were collected through direct observation, audiovisual recordings, and publicly available sermon videos. The analysis identified eleven positive politeness strategies, including expressing attentiveness, using in-group markers, seeking agreement, incorporating humour, and offering gifts, that enabled GI to mitigate face-threatening acts, build rapport, and reinforce social cohesion. These strategies not only bridged religious and cultural divides but also nurtured communal identity and mutual respect. The findings advance socio-pragmatics and intercultural communication by demonstrating how contextually sensitive politeness practices can enhance inclusivity and unity in pluralistic religious settings, offering practical implications for religious, educational, and community leadership.

Index Terms—positive politeness, socio-pragmatic analysis, multicultural religious communication, interpersonal solidarity, inclusive discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

Politeness is a crucial element of human communication, serving to maintain social harmony and manage potential conflict by attending to individuals' "face", or public self-image. Brown and Levinson's (1987) influential theory defines politeness as strategic behaviour for navigating face-threatening acts (FTAs), distinguishing between positive face, the desire to be liked and appreciated, and negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. While these needs are universal, their expression is shaped by cultural norms. In collectivist societies, Mao (1994) argues, speakers often emphasize indirectness and deference to preserve group harmony, whereas individualistic cultures may value directness as a form of respect for autonomy. Similarly, Scollon and Scollon (2001) emphasize that politeness is culturally embedded and influenced by roles, power relations, and expectations, requiring communicative competence and cultural sensitivity in diverse or intercultural settings.

Politeness strategies are not merely linguistic choices; they are culturally and socially grounded practices for sustaining social relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014; Machino et al., 2025; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Brown and Levinson's model remains relevant across diverse contexts, particularly for analyzing communication in multicultural communities. In collectivist settings, politeness may manifest through deference and an emphasis on relational harmony,

making pragmatic and cultural sensitivity essential in cross-cultural communication (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Mao, 1994; Nkirote, 2024).

An illustrative case is Gus Iqdam (GI), a young religious leader (*kyai*) in East Java, Indonesia. His *ta'lim* assembly, Sabilu Taubah (ST), has grown from a small group into a congregation of tens of thousands, comprising individuals from various religious and cultural backgrounds, including Muslims, Catholics, Hindus, and Buddhists (Fikri et al., 2023; Ulfah, 2023). The weekly gatherings in Karanggayam village reflect a remarkable degree of intercultural and interfaith engagement. Members of the ST assembly often travel long distances and arrive early, highlighting not only devotion but also the social draw of GI's distinctive communicative style. This setting raises the scholarly question of how language use and politeness strategies contribute to cohesion and mutual respect in such a pluralistic context.

The utilization of positive politeness strategies by the GI exemplifies the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). His communicative style, characterized by humour, inclusivity, and relational language, fosters familiarity and solidarity. Positive politeness encompasses strategies that appeal to the audience's desire for approval and belonging. GI employs humour not only for entertainment but also to diminish social distance, encourage participation, and establish rapport. Additionally, he utilizes inclusive language that acknowledges the diverse identities of his audience, thereby fostering a shared sense of purpose and value among them. By emphasizing spiritual growth, mutual respect, and togetherness, the GI strengthens communal bonds across religious and ethnic boundaries. His speech style resonates with both devout followers and secular attendees, indicating that effective positive politeness can attract and unite diverse audience members.

This study applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, which categorizes FTAs according to their impact on positive or negative face. Negative face reflects an individual's desire for freedom and autonomy, whereas positive face reflects the need to be liked and included. These concepts, though universal, are flexible and context-sensitive. The theory remains useful for analyzing politeness in multicultural settings where face needs vary with cultural norms (Brown, 2015; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Haugh, 2013; Ryabova, 2015).

Contemporary scholarship has expanded the study of politeness by offering fresh insights into its role in cross-cultural and digital contexts. Nkirote (2024) highlights how cultural norms shape the enactment of politeness, positioning it as a strategic resource for managing hierarchy, harmony, and identity in diverse interactions. Eslami et al. (2023) further demonstrate that identity and politeness are fluidly negotiated through discursive practices, requiring communicative competence attuned to sociocultural norms and power relations in a globalized world. Complementing this, Suparno et al. (2023) reconceptualize politeness in digital communication as a strategic discursive tool for navigating status, identity, and relational dynamics in multiethnic and technologically mediated environments.

In this light, the communicative practices of GI present a timely and insightful case for analyzing positive politeness in a highly diverse religious setting. This study examines how GI uses positive politeness to manage FTAs, build rapport, and promote inclusivity in his religious discourse. His use of humour, recognition of shared values, and careful attention to audience diversity allow him to bridge religious, ethnic, and linguistic divides. These strategies support social cohesion and interfaith understanding, making his communication style a powerful tool for managing diversity.

In pluralistic societies, such communicative competence is increasingly vital. Language functions not only as a vehicle for conveying information but also as a mechanism for managing identity, power, politeness, and social relations (Eslami et al., 2023; Nkirote, 2024; Suparno et al., 2023; Virtanen & Lee, 2022). The success of GI in promoting harmony among multicultural audiences underscores the broader significance of politeness as a context-sensitive and socially embedded phenomenon. This study contributes to sociopragmatics and intercultural communication by demonstrating how strategic language use upholds mutual respect and solidarity within diverse communities.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative socio-pragmatic approach to examine how GI applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies in interactions with the Sabilu Taubah (ST) *ta'lim* assembly in Karanggayam Village, Blitar, East Java. Conducted in July 2024, the research explored how GI nurtures interpersonal relationships and fosters solidarity within a culturally diverse religious community. The socio-pragmatic framework enabled analysis of language use within its social and cultural context, highlighting how politeness strategies manage face and promote harmony (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Nkirote, 2024). Recent scholarship supports such context-sensitive approaches, particularly in intercultural and interfaith communication, where politeness is tied to identity and power dynamics (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). By focusing on the interplay of language, culture, and interaction, this study contributes to understanding how pragmatic strategies support cohesion and mutual respect in complex religious settings, offering insights into the role of politeness in maintaining unity in diverse communities.

This study utilized a triangulated data collection methodology, incorporating direct observation, audio-visual recordings, and publicly accessible secondary sources to construct a communication profile of GI's application of positive politeness. Primary data were gathered through direct observations and live recordings of the GI's preaching sessions at the MTST. The research team conducted recordings four times, each Monday evening, in July 2024. Supplementary data from YouTube videos provided additional examples of the GI's communicative style, facilitating the cross-validation of politeness strategies. This multi-source approach enhances the credibility and validity of the data (Carter et al., 2014; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024; Qassimi, 2023).

The data collection instruments included both human and technical components of the study. The researcher served as the primary instrument, employing her socio-pragmatic and discourse-analytic expertise to analyse the politeness strategies (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The technical tools comprised high-quality audio-visual equipment for recording verbal and non-verbal communication, complemented by structured observation instruments that facilitated the systematic identification of (Brown & Levinson, 1987) positive politeness strategies employed by the GI in his interactions with the MTST congregation. This combination ensured a comprehensive, reliable, and nuanced account of face-saving and solidarity-building practices in GI's religious discourses.

The data were analysed using descriptive techniques, adhering to the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2018), a widely recognized framework for qualitative research that emphasizes an iterative and systematic approach to interpretation. This model comprises four interconnected and recursive steps: (1) Data collection and familiarization: systematic observation and verbatim transcription of interactions to capture both verbal and nonverbal cues. Preserving contextual details is essential for accurately analysing politeness strategies. (2) Data reduction and coding: The corpus was filtered and coded to identify positive politeness strategies, such as attending to the listener's needs and employing in-group markers, while maintaining context through thematic categorization (Saldana, 2025). (3) Data cues and display: presenting reduced data through thematic matrices, charts, and summaries to highlight patterns and language use, thereby supporting clarity, revealing connections, and enhancing analytical transparency (Miles et al., 2018). (4) Conclusion drawing and verification: conducting interpretive synthesis grounded in the data and verifying claims through cross-checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing, in accordance with established qualitative standards (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis, interactions between GI and the Sabilu Taubah (*ST ta'lim*) congregation exhibited 11 of Brown and Levinson's (1987) 15 positive politeness strategies. These strategies reflect speakers' efforts to maintain social harmony and minimize face-threatening acts (FTAs). The strategies identified include (1) noticing/attending to the hearer and showing sympathy; (2) using in-group identity markers to build solidarity; (3) seeking agreement; (4) giving/asking for reasons; (5) echoing or repeating the hearer's words as active listening; (6) including both speaker and hearer in the activity; (7) complimenting/expressing approval; (8) expressing optimism; (9) employing humour to ease tension; (10) asserting common ground by emphasizing shared experiences or similarities; and (11) giving "gifts" (tangible or symbolic) such as goods, time, sympathy, or support. Taken together, these strategies helped mitigate FTAs, build rapport, and reinforce social cohesion within a culturally plural setting.

A. Attention and Sympathy Toward the Hearer

In the following excerpt, GI directs deference and sympathy towards Mr. D, a key donor in the ST community, while also using affiliative humour with another attendee. Although the dominant orientation is positive politeness (approval, camaraderie), elements of negative politeness (respect for autonomy, non-imposition) surface through the use of indirectness and honorific address (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

1. GI: "*Lah alhamdulillah jadi luar biasa Pak D. Gek panggah awet enom beliau niki nggih to... Ora koyo sampeyan mosok kesusu tuwek ngunu.*"

(GI: Well, alhamdulillah, that's truly remarkable, Mr. D. And he still looks so young, doesn't he? Unlike you - how come you're in such a rush to grow old like that?)

Here, GI publicly acknowledges Mr. D's virtue and ongoing contributions. The compliment ("*awet enom... still looks so young*") exemplifies positive politeness by noticing the hearer and affirming his social value, thereby strengthening solidarity. The playful jab at another member immediately afterwards functions as joking, including a joke, a classic positive-politeness move that softens potential face threat and fosters camaraderie. Humour reframes what could be an FTA (alluding to ageing) into a bonding moment that normalizes proximity and inclusivity.

GI's turn design blends positive and negative politeness: positive politeness conveys closeness and appreciation; negative politeness is visible in deferential address (Mr. D) and indirectness that avoids imposing claims on the donor. This balance maintains familiarity without breaching respect crucial in a culturally layered, hierarchically organized *ta'lim* setting. The approach aligns with Goffman's (1967) notion of *face* as the negotiated social self and joke as self and with subsequent work on delicacy in public talk and accountability (Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Mao, 1994; Serpa & Ferreira, 2018).

This pattern mirrors broader tendencies in religious leadership discourse, where speakers often combine indirectness and empathy to uphold authority while remaining approachable (Boyatzis et al., 2011; Braun, 2020). In parallel, Holmes (2014) shows that humour can reduce face threats and enhance unity in institutional interactions. GI's ability to shift fluidly between deference and familiarity demonstrates culturally attuned communicative competence. In effect, his language use consolidates respect and belonging, enabling smooth, inclusive participation. Consequently, he strengthens both emotional bonds and social harmony in the religious space, an essential leadership resource in multicultural communities.

B. Using In-Group Markers

In the following excerpt, GI strategically employs in-group markers to cultivate solidarity and a shared identity within the congregation. Central to this is his use of a term which has been recontextualized within the MTST community: '*garangan*'.

2. GI: *Kadang garangan-garangan i lho. Ngaji dunga. Ya Allah 'garangan' - Allah, pengin bojo ya Allah Gusti. Alhamdulillah donga diijabahi. Simpangan ning ndalan enek wong wedok rodok kapusan. Nyawang deke ketok ganteng, Masya Allah niki nopo mas Den Bst wah...*

(GI: Sometimes these *garangan-garangan*, you know, recite the Qur'an and pray. O Allah, I want a partner, O Allah. Alhamdulillah, the prayers were answered. Crossing the road, there was a woman who was a little taken in by how handsome he looked. *Mā shā' Allāh*, what is this, Den? Best, Allah, Best? Wow... Best? Wow...)

The *garangan* (*Herpestes javanicus*) is a wild mongoose-like animal culturally associated with aggressiveness and destructiveness, particularly due to its tendency to prey on domesticated chickens. In everyday usage, the term '*garangan*' has therefore developed into a pejorative label for individuals perceived as wild, delinquent, and difficult to control. However, within the MTST community, the term undergoes significant resemanticisation. This shift in meaning is rooted in the group's origin story, which centres on seven early members - former heavy drinkers and petty offenders - who repented under GI's guidance. Their moral transformation enabled a process of identity reappropriation, through which a negative label was reclaimed and endowed with honourable value as a marker of spiritual renewal (Galinsky et al., 2013). The repeated use of the term in internal discourse and its reinforcement through communal rituals subsequently produced a stigma inversion, whereby the stigma is recast as a symbol of solidarity and piety (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This phenomenon corresponds with the notion of religious identity reframing, wherein language serves as a tool for restructuring the community's moral and spiritual identity (Brandt, 2019; Omoniyi & Fishman, 2008).

GI reflects the congregation's spiritual condition, sincere Qur'anic recitation, and prayers for a life partner, while humorously acknowledging the ongoing vulnerability to worldly temptation. The term '*garangan*'...wow... '*Garangan*' is pivotal: GI redefines it to denote those who have repented from behaviors such as drinking or stealing and embraced a more devout life. This semantic shift from stigma to redemption transforms a previously pejorative label into a symbol of spiritual renewal. Within the ST community, '*Garangan*' becomes a badge of honor, signalling personal growth and collective transformation. This linguistic reframing aligns with the Islamic principle of *taubah* (repentance), whereby sincere remorse restores one's standing in the *ummah* (Muslim community) and resonates with traditions that view reformed sinners as spiritually renewed through divine grace.

The move also reflects broader Javanese linguistic practice, where resignification reclaims stigmatised identities through communal memory and moral realignment. As scholars note, such group markers do not merely categorise; they actively construct shared values and cohesion (Allidina & Cunningham, 2023). In a multicultural religious setting, '*garangan*' operates as an inclusive emblem that bridges diverse experiences by affirming both past struggles and ongoing spiritual growth. Through this strategy, GI cultivates empathy and moral authority, offering a safe, trusting environment. Ultimately, '*garangan*' functions as a powerful resource for moral renewal, group solidarity, and spiritual resilience - a core positive-politeness mechanism of claiming common ground via in-group identity markers (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

C. Seeking the Interlocutor's Approval

In the following excerpt, GI seeks his interlocutor's approval as part of a broader strategy to build solidarity within the MTST community. The move fosters proximity and shared understanding while maintaining respect:

3. GI: *Nggih 'garangan' Nggih, kerana ya wis rada pantes cara njenengan. Nyuwun sewu, tapi Gusti Allah niki ya Maha Rahman Rahim. Ora padha karo menungsa. Beda, tapi cara etikane mawon lo nggih ta?*

(GI: Well, that may be because your way is quite reasonable. Forgive me, but Allah is the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. He is not like humans. Different-yet should the ethics not be the same, right?)

In this context, the GI elucidates that approaching the Divine with appropriate *adab* (ethics) enhances the probability of prayers being answered; while highlighting the ontological distinction between Allah and humans, he emphasizes the continuity of moral principles in respectful communication. Notably, the statement concludes with the Javanese *Krama tag nggih ta*. ("right?") is an approval-seeking mechanism that invites alignment and shares perspectives.

Functionally, *nggih ta? Nggih*, doubles as politeness. First, it realizes positive politeness by seeking agreement and affiliating with the audience's viewpoint (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Second, as a mitigating interrogative/hedge, it also performs negative politeness by softening potential imposition and displaying deference. The combination enables GI to maintain authority while remaining approachable, a balance that is especially salient in a hierarchically organized, multicultural *ta'lim* setting. This aligns with interactional accounts of face as a negotiated moral-social order (Goffman, 1967) and with observations that small tokens such as tag questions, gratitude, and address forms operate as face-enhancing strategies in religious discourse (Locher & Watts, 2008; Mokuchowska, 2023).

In spiritual contexts, approval-seeking tags such as "*nggih ta?*" ("right?") serve a dual function: they ratify the speaker's point while inviting collaboration. GI's polite marker helps create an environment in which members feel acknowledged and respected, reinforcing collective identity and smoothing differences in background and religious knowledge. In effect, the move contributes to rapport management and group cohesion, exemplifying how context-sensitive politeness practices support inclusive, dialogic religious communication.

D. Asking Questions and Requesting Reasons

In the following interaction, GI uses questions to invite dialogue and build rapport with attendees from the College of Buddhist Studies, thereby fostering familiarity and connection within the MTST community. The questioning accomplishes dual politeness work: it asks for reasons - a positive-politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy - and mitigates imposition through an open, choice-giving format characteristic of negative politeness.

4. GI: *Gimana ceritanya kok bisa hadir di sini gimana?*

Jamaah (J): *Kita KKN teng mriki. Hehe. Nggih ta? Heh. Enggih terus ikut teman.*

GI: *Heeh, lah. Heh. Lah, tadi kok nggak malah, nggak bales njenengan, woh nggak? Wow, pengajian iki nekakne Gus Iqdam.*

J: *Ndak, saya ngefans sama Gus Iqdam soalnya.*

GI: *Masyaallah, iki wong Budha malah ngefans aku. Sing Islam malah maido tolol? Whoa, tolol. Gimana-gimana? Padahal gimana-gimana? Padahal kan kamu beda agama sama saya. Padahal saya. Kenapa saya? Kenapa kamu kok ngefans sama saya itu?*

J: *Saya itu lihatnya di TikTok, yang pertama kan muncul.*

GI: *He-eh.*

J: *Terus sering muncul. Oh, kok ceramahnya... Oke. Kenapa Oke buat anak muda gitu?*

GI: *Nanti kamu datang gak, tak paksa gak, kudu syahadat - tenang aja. Wes, pokoké awaké dhéwé adem ayem.*

(GI: What's the story - how did you come to be here?)

Congregation (C): *We're on a community service programme (KKN) here. Yes, then I joined a friend.*

GI: *So why weren't you reluctant? You came to this gathering because of Gus Iqdam, right?*

C: *No, I'm a fan of Gus Iqdam, Oke Iqdam; that's why.*

GI: *Mā shā' Allāh, a Buddhist is a fan of mine - while some Muslims talk me down [joking]. How is it that, although you're of a different religion from me, you're a fan of mine?*

C: *I first saw you on TikTok.*

GI: *Uh-huh.*

C: *Then you appeared often. I thought, "These sermons are good for young people."*

GI: *Whether you come or not, I won't force you; there's no need to recite the shahada - Don't worry. We'll keep things calm and at ease.)*

Two features stand out. First, GI's open interrogatives *Gimana ceritanya...?* ("What's the story...?") and *Kenapa Iqdam and kenapa kamu kok ngefans...?* ("Why Iqdam" and "Why are you a fan of mine?") operate as stance-inviting questions that solicit the attendee's reasons and narrative. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, this realizes positive politeness by seeking agreement and giving/asking for reasons; it constructs common ground and displays interest in the other's perspective. Second, by reassuring the attendee, "I won't force you; no need to recite the shahada," GI minimizes imposition and reduces potential threat around interfaith difference, a hallmark of negative politeness (respect for autonomy, non-coercion).

Humour and warmth further defuse tension and thicken solidarity, turning potentially delicate topics (religious difference, conversion anxiety) into opportunities for inclusive affiliation. As Holmes (2014) notes, questioning in institutional talk can promote social bonding and navigate group dynamics; similarly, intercultural communication research links such pragmatic sensitivity to increased empathy and cohesion (Gudykunst et al., 1996). In this exchange, GI's design of questions paired with assurances models a dialogic, low-pressure footing that sustains rapport across faith boundaries while preserving dignity and choice.

E. Repeating the Statement

In the exchange below, GI uses repetition to maintain attention and reinforce affiliation with his congregation. Echoing key items from the interlocutor's answers operates as positive politeness: it displays attentiveness, ratifies the speaker's contribution, and narrows social distance.

5. GI: *R, rumahnya mana, Mbak R?*

J: *Batam.*

GI: *Batam.*

J: *Iya.*

GI: *Mohon maaf, agamanya apa?*

J: *Konghucu.*

GI: *Konghucu. Siap, siap, siap, siap. Mbak R ke sini pertama kali?*

J: *First time.*

GI: *Opo kui? Aku ora iso kaya R, piye?*

J: *Baru pertama kali, Gus.*

GI: *Oh, Iya, first time.*

(GI: R, where do you live, Miss R?)

C: *Batam.*

GI: *Batam.*

C: Yes.

GI: Pardon me, what is your religion?

C: Confucianism.

GI: Confucianism. Right, right, right, right. Is this your first time here, Miss R?

C: First time.

GI: What's that? I can't be like R, how so?

C: It's my first time, Gus.

GI: Ah, yes, first time.)

GI reflects key aspects of R's responses, such as *Batam*, *Konghucu* (Confucianism), and the notion of the first time, serving as alignment tokens that indicate attentive listening and encouragement to continue. This echoic repetition exemplifies a classic form of positive politeness, characterized by noticing and attending to the hearer and claiming common ground, and functions as positive reinforcement that ensures the interlocutor feels acknowledged and valued (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The repetition of "first time," in particular, recognizes the importance of R's experience and normalizes any potential anxiety or curiosity, thereby fostering solidarity in an intercultural context (Gudykunst, 2004; Gudykunst et al., 1996).

Simultaneously, repetition mitigates face-threatening acts by affirming responses prior to progression, while gentle inquiries (GI) alleviate potentially sensitive questions (e.g., regarding religion), maintain a non-confrontational tone, and uphold the interlocutor's autonomy (Aporbo et al., 2024; Latrech & Alazzawie, 2023). In religious gatherings, where sensitivity and mutual respect are of utmost importance, this echoic style fosters a warm, inclusive environment, enhancing rapport and cohesion while exemplifying respectful dialogic engagement.

F. Involving Speech Partners

In the following exchange, GI uses inclusive language to involve his congregation in the learning process, emphasizing that religious understanding may be gained not only from sacred texts but also by observing the good qualities of others. The inclusive pronoun *kita* ("we") functions as a positive-politeness resource that reduces social distance and builds solidarity by including speaker and hearer in the same activity (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

6. GI: *Lah, ini loh, R?) Loh, kita itu ngaji tidak harus dari kitab terus, atau apa. Dari orang lain yang memiliki kepribadian baik niku nggih ngaji, nggih ngaji. Niku kaya A, keng Mas DB. Ternyata, di balik gimble, di balik reggae-ne, nek aku iki ngopi. Nek beliau iki mesti enek slokine, tapi di dalam hatinya selalu tertanam: hormati ibumu, hormati, hormati ibumu.*

(GI: See, what I mean is that we don't have to study the Qur'an only from classical texts or formal teachers. Learning from someone with good character is also Qur'anic study. It is Qur'anic study too - like A or Mas DB. Behind the dreadlocks, behind the reggae style - while I might just be out having coffee- he always has a guiding maxim, 'loh maxim', and in his heart the message is deeply rooted: honour your mother, honour your mother, honour your mother. Maxim, Mother.)

Here, GI explicitly claims common ground through *kita* ("we"), inviting the audience into a shared epistemic and moral project. He reframes sources of religious learning: exemplary conduct becomes *ngaji* in its own right. By naming relatable figures (*A*, *Mas DB*) with unconventional appearances, GI normalizes diversity and recenters spiritual worth on integrity and filial piety rather than outward conformity. The triple repetition "honour your mother" intensifies alignment, acting as positive reinforcement and a mnemonic refrain that binds speaker and audience affectively.

Pragmatically, the move realises several positive-politeness strategies, including (i) involving S and H in the activity through the inclusive pronoun '*kita*'; (ii) asserting shared values (common ground); and (iii) using in-group markers such as local terms ('*ngaji*') and references to community figures (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In intercultural congregations, such inclusivity enables participants from diverse backgrounds to recognise themselves in the message, thereby strengthening rapport and participation (Eden et al., 2024; Feitosa et al., 2022; Scollon & Scollon, 2001).

Research on inclusive language likewise shows that we-framing fosters shared identity and rapport (Holmes, 2014) and that accessible, story-driven exemplars in religious discourse can enhance uptake and solidarity (Mokuchowska, 2024). In GI's practice, inclusive pronouns and relatable exemplars co-produce a welcoming, dialogic space for learning, one that supports unity and mutual respect across a diverse religious community.

G. Giving Praise

In this excerpt, GI uses praise as a strategic resource to acknowledge and honour others' contributions while deepening emotional connection and commitment to shared religious values. As positive reinforcement, praise validates the addressee and uplifts the group, thereby fostering unity and mutual respect within the congregation.

7. GI: *Yang saya hormati tamu-tamu yang luar biasa yang datang dari jauh-jauh. Alhamdulillah, malam hari ini ada vokal yang luar biasa, panjenenganipun Gus IH dari Pasuruan. Luar biasa suaranya yang baru saja kita dengarkan bersama yang mengajak kita semua membaca shalawat. Semoga lantunan-lantunan shalawat yang dibaca Gus IH senantiasa benar-benar menjadi semangat kita untuk semakin mencintai Rasulullah - peace and blessings be upon him. Aamiin.*

(GI: My deepest respect to the distinguished guests who have come from far away. Alhamdulillah, tonight we are graced by an extraordinary vocal performance by Gus IH from Pasuruan. His voice, which we have just

listened to together, is truly remarkable and has invited us all to recite shalawat. May the shalawat beautifully delivered by Gus IH continue to inspire us to deepen our love for the Prophet Muhammad - peace and blessings be upon him. *Āmīn.*)

In this context, the GI's engagement in '*ngaji*' (Qur'anic study) and their frequent use of the intensifier '*luar biasa*' (extraordinary), along with the communal framing ("we have just listened together"), serve to implement several positive-politeness strategies. These strategies include attending to the hearer, expressing approval or admiration (through compliments), exaggerating interest or approval, and establishing common ground through a shared devotional act, such as reciting '*shalawat*' (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Public acknowledgment of GI enhances his positive face, which pertains to social esteem and appreciation, aligning with Goffman's (1967) conceptualization of face-work as the maintenance of moral and social order.

Pragmatically, praise here also operates as a "gift" to the hearer (goods, sympathy, encouragement), which, in Brown and Levinson's terms, strengthens affiliative ties and builds rapport across the assembly. In a multicultural setting such as MTST, foregrounding shared admiration and gratitude helps bridge differences and consolidate an inclusive, cooperative footing. Empirical work on institutional and religious talk shows that praise and appreciation promote gratitude, affiliation, and group cohesion (Holmes, 2014; Watts, 2003). By amplifying GI's qualities and linking them to a communal aspiration - deepening love for the Prophet - GI not only validates an individual contributor but also animates collective values, encouraging the congregation to internalize respect, admiration, and devotion as shared norms.

H. Showing Optimism

In this excerpt, GI deploys optimism to motivate his congregation towards a positive outlook on life and faith. By voicing confidence in their capacity for spiritual fulfilment and success, he encourages self-belief while reinforcing trust in divine providence. In this religious context, optimism fosters hope and strengthens the perceived linkage between personal effort and divine grace.

8. GI: *Dan saya yakin ketika orang itu mampu berpikir dengan jenius, dengan serius, pasti dia akan menemukan nikmat tersebut. Wa mā bikum min ni'matin fa-min Allāh. Kenikmatan apa pun yang ada dalam diri panjenengan atau di antara sekitar panjenengan semuanya adalah dari Allāh Subhānahu wa Ta'ālā.*

(GI: And I am certain that when a person can think seriously and with discernment, they will surely discover that blessing. *Wa mā bikum min ni'matin fa-min Allāh* (Whatever blessings you have are from God), Whatever blessing you have within yourselves or around you is from God, the Exalted.)

GI's stance-taking "I am certain" is a textbook instance of positive politeness in Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy, specifically the "be optimistic" strategy that aligns the hearer with a desirable outcome and presupposes shared commitment. Framing achievement as the co-production of effort and grace affirms the audience's competence and worth (positive face), while the absence of directives keeps uptake voluntary, thereby also displaying negative politeness (respect for autonomy).

The Qur'anic phrase *Wa mā bikum min ni'matin fa-min Allāh* (Whatever blessing you possess is from Allah) grounds optimism theologically, reframing it from mere affect to an ethic of gratitude and trust. In institutional religious discourse, such optimism is shown to bolster resilience and faith (Hussein & Al-Husseini, 2023) and to shape attitudes inclusively in diverse congregations (Zhu, 2025). Here, GI's confident yet non-imposing tone normalizes hope, invites perseverance in spiritual growth, and consolidates collective identity: members are encouraged to recognize their gifts as divinely sourced while continuing to strive. Through this blend of doctrinal anchoring and inclusive rhetoric, GI cultivates a cohesive, supportive environment in Sabilu Taubah, one in which gratitude, dignity, and ongoing self-improvement are shared communal aims.

I. Use of Humour

GI uses humour to foster solidarity and make religious teachings more relatable. By jokingly glossing the term '*garangan*' as a wayward person who has repented, he reduces social distance and creates a welcoming atmosphere. The light tone not only eases interaction but also reinforces a sense of community among those embracing spiritual renewal, rendering the message of repentance more accessible and engaging.

9. GI: *Enèk tante-tante tim Pajero ngunu, takok. Bojone wong-wong Pajero kuwi biasane nek nyeluk cah-cah, "tante". 'garangan' a "tante". Ora kaya pikiranmu angger "tante" kok dipikir ngerès thok. Nah, kalebu wong tolol ngunu kuwi, lho. Dadi "tante" kuwi nek takok gèné: "Gus, garangan iku apa, sih? Garangan ki apa?" Aku bingung ditakonilah sing mlaku nganu-nganu iki garangan. Alhamdulillah, ora teka kabèh wongé? Iki wong shalih kabèh, wong apik saben dina jamaah... minum miras? Ora gelem iki ngombé banyu thok. Air laut? Yo air laut... peceren kuwi!*

(GI: There were some "Pajero club aunties" asking questions. The wives in Pajero circles often call the youngsters "auntie", "*tante*", "auntie". Not like how you lot always think - hearing "auntie" and assuming something indecent. That kind of thinking is [foolish - joking]. So one of the aunties asked, "*Gus, what is garangan? What does garangan masked" mean?* I was stumped wandering about it. They pointed and said, "This one's a *garangan*." Alhamdulillah, not everyone showed up today, eh? These are righteous folks - good people - every day the congregation... drink alcohol? No, just water. Seawater? Yes, seawater... from the drain!)

In this passage, GI's playful narrative re-signifies the *garangan* as a drain, or a stigmatized identity, to an emblem of redemption and belonging. The teasing asides and exaggerated contrasts (from "liquor" to "just water", "garangan water", and even "seawater from the drain") function as joking and exaggeration - recognized positive politeness strategies that claim common ground, display involvement, and soften potential face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The humour demystifies the label, allowing self-identified *garangan* to feel seen, safe, and included, while inviting the wider audience to adopt an accepting stance.

In multicultural congregations, humour operates as a social glue: it lowers tension, bridges subcultural references (e.g., the "*Pajero*" motif), and aligns the group around shared values of repentance and improvement (Gifu et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2024; Zamroni, 2023). Here, GI's calibrated levity affirms positive face (approval, esteem) and sustains cohesion without coercion, illustrating how context-sensitive humour can animate moral themes and consolidate communal identity in religious discourse.

J. Demonstrating Similarities

GI underscores similarity and shared purpose with a respected philanthropist, Mr. Haji D, to cultivate solidarity and enhance message uptake. By aligning his own contribution (oratory and guidance) with Mr. Haji D's (material success and philanthropy), GI claims common ground and associates himself with a valued in-group model, a classic positive-politeness move (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

10. GI: *Jadi alhamdulillah, Pak Haji D, Dek e mirip-mirip karo aku. Ning nek aku kuwi modalé ngomong ngéné iki, nek piyambaké kan suksesé. Alhamdulillah, sing cedhak karo piyambaké kuwi kiai, Gus-Gus, nganti wong-wong kaya Mas Den Bst wis global.*

(GI: So, alhamdulillah, Mr. Haji D is somewhat similar to me. My "capital" is speaking like this, while his is his success. Alhamdulillah, the people close to him are respected figures, *kiai*, young religious leaders (Gus), even well-known people like Mas Den Bst. He's "gone global" now.)

By explicitly drawing a parallel between speech as moral capital and wealth as philanthropic capital, GI reframes these different resources as complementary means toward a shared communal end: guiding people on the path of repentance (MTST). This equivalence framing reduces social distance and encourages the audience to view both figures as relatable role models who mobilise distinct assets for collective religious purposes. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, GI asserts common ground and positions the speaker and hearer within the same activity, thereby reinforcing affiliation.

The move also resonates with Goffman's (1967) face-work: affiliating with an esteemed benefactor supports GI's positive face (credibility, esteem) while simultaneously enhancing Mr. Haji D's by publicly acknowledging his contribution. From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), such alignment leverages in-group prestige to bolster collective self-worth and norm endorsement; audiences are encouraged to identify with a unified moral project in which both rhetorical guidance and material generosity advance piety, social good, and community solidarity (see Khadka, 2024; Kish Bar-On & Lamm, 2023).

Pragmatically, the utterance performs multiple positive-politeness strategies: (1) Claiming in-group membership and shared values (religious guidance, *taubah*), (2) Exaggeration/hyperbole ("gone global") to amplify approval, and (3) Noticing/attending to the hearer's values by validating philanthropy and leadership as coequal virtues. Overall, by demonstrating similarities and complementary capital, GI consolidates communal identity and deepens rapport: different paths of eloquence and philanthropy are framed as aligned contributions to the same redemptive mission.

K. Providing Gifts

In religious settings, gift-giving is more than a simple transfer of goods; it is a ritualized communicative act that reinforces social cohesion, nurtures communal identity, and affirms relational hierarchies (Kádár et al., 2025; Shanka & Handley, 2011; Zhu et al., 2000). Within the *ta'lim* context of MTST, GI frequently mobilizes this strategy by offering financial gifts or community products to congregants both as appreciation and as a performance of benevolent leadership.

11. GI: *Bu M...*

J: *Enggih.*

GI: *Njenengan angsal arta. Niki saking Mas D, saking Mas S. kalih saking Mas NK. Mas NK punika MC ingkang luar biasa. Kula maringi Njenengan Rp 300.000 tunai.*

(GI: Mrs. M...

C: Yes, sir.

GI: You are receiving some money. This is from Mas D, Mas S and Mas NK. Mas NK is an outstanding MC. I will also give you Rp 300,000 in cash.)

In this instance, GI first attributes the financial gift to two donors (Mas S and Mas NK) and subsequently adds his own contribution. Pragmatically, this realizes Brown and Levinson's (1987) "give gifts to the hearer" positive-politeness strategy, fostering closeness, gratitude, and goodwill. Beyond the interpersonal level, public generosity by religious figures often indexes spiritual authority and moral legitimacy in Islamic communities, embedding leadership within norms of care and obligation (Feng et al., 2011; Kádár et al., 2025; Mauss, 2024; Shi et al., 2025). By giving in public, GI reaffirms status while expressing solidarity, softening leader-follower boundaries through shared affect and material support.

Gift-giving also builds collective identity. Acts like GI's gesture to Mrs. M seed a culture of reciprocity, strengthening belonging and shared responsibility (Gino & Flynn, 2011; Mauss, 2024). When ST-branded products circulate in these exchanges, economic participation intertwines with spiritual commitment, reinforcing a moral economy of mutual care. As Branco-Illodo and Heath (2020) argue, the "perfect gift" is defined less by price than by the symbolic resonance of its power to honour the recipient, consolidate relationships, and invoke a shared history. In this sense, GI's gifting is not mere charity: it is a culturally meaningful speech act that animates community values, sustains rapport, and deepens the congregation's sense of a common moral project.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that GI's strategic employment of positive politeness strategies - comprising attentiveness, in-group markers, humour, repetition, praise, inclusive we-framing, optimism, questioning or soliciting reasons, and gift-giving - effectively cultivates interpersonal solidarity and mitigates face-threatening acts within a highly religiously diverse context. By integrating culturally embedded communicative practices with Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, GI bridges religious, ethnic, and generational divides within the MTST congregation, cultivating mutual respect, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. These findings affirm that positive politeness is not merely a linguistic choice but a socially and culturally grounded strategy that sustains harmony and reinforces communal identity in pluralistic contexts. The analysis further contributes to socio-pragmatics and intercultural communication by illustrating how religious leaders can employ context-sensitive politeness to navigate complex identity dynamics and power relations.

These strategies were not ad hoc; they are deeply embedded in GI's communicative style and surface across sermons, personal interactions, and informal talk. For instance, his ability to combine humour with empathy humanises complex religious themes and connects with younger or less formally religious audiences. His repeated acknowledgement of group identity through in-group terms (e.g., *garangan*, *tim Pajero*) fosters a strong sense of shared experience, while symbolic acts of gift-giving reinforce social ties and elevate the communal spirit of the MTST. Ultimately, GI's discourse style reflects a nuanced understanding of relational dynamics in multicultural religious contexts and demonstrates how language can be a powerful tool for building cross-cultural solidarity within spiritual communities.

Future research should extend the investigation of positive politeness in religious discourse to other multicultural and interfaith contexts, enabling comparative analyses of how leaders in different traditions adapt strategies to their sociocultural environments. Scholars might also explore the role of digital media in amplifying or reshaping these strategies, given the increasing hybridisation of offline and online religious interactions. Practitioners in religious, educational, and community leadership are encouraged to adopt inclusive, contextually sensitive politeness strategies, such as humour, inclusive language, and symbolic gift-giving, to foster solidarity and bridge differences. Finally, longitudinal studies could examine how sustained use of such strategies impacts long-term cohesion, trust, and intergroup relations in diverse communities.

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